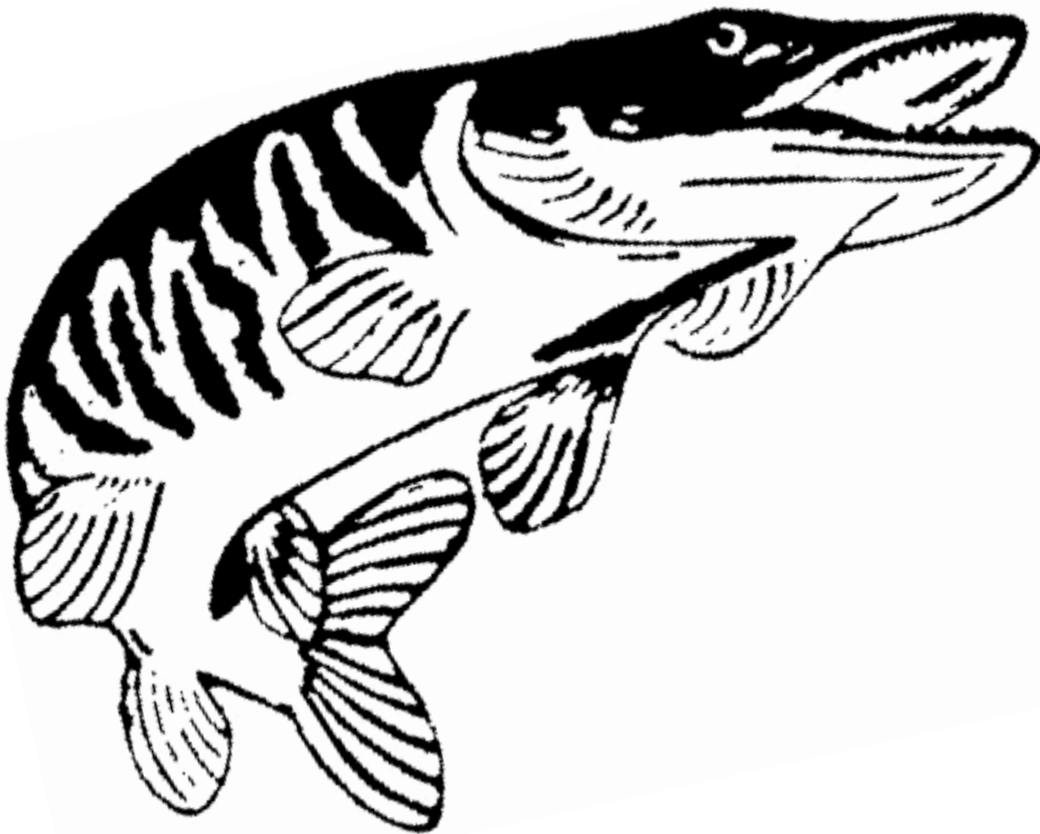


National Championship Musky Open Remembered



**28th Anniversary
August 16th - 18th, 2013**

Open attracts record 1,222 anglers

Peplinski becomes first female to win event

BY GARY RIDDERBUSCH
NEWS-REVIEW EDITOR

The National Championship Musky Open was once again a record-setting event, as what is likely the most popular fishing tournament in the Midwest attracted 1,222 anglers to 72 Eagle River area lakes last Friday through Sunday.

Michelle Peplinski of Bear Creek was the top angler and the first female to win the tournament, while Aaron Lang of Marshfield was the luckiest ticket holder in the 28th annual tournament, headquartered at the Vilas County Fairgrounds.

A total of 219 tournament-size (34 inches and over) muskies were registered in the three-day event, another record. The previous record was 195 fish established in 2012. While most anglers fished just Saturday and Sunday, fishing on Friday was optional.

The tournament is sponsored by the Eagle River Area Chamber of Commerce & Visitors Center and the Musky Clubs Alliance of Wisconsin. The record number of anglers from 15 states topped the old mark of 1,111 anglers last year.



The top finishers in the Musky Open included, front row from left, Michelle Peplinski, first; Steve Klesmith, second; Shawn Kopke, third;

and back row, Airin Jensen, fourth; Joshua Larson, fifth; and Steven Tilque, sixth.

—Staff Photos By GARY RIDDERBUSCH



Michelle Peplinski receives her first place tournament trophy from Larry Slagoski, president of Musky Clubs Alliance of Wisconsin

Top anglers

Peplinski won the tournament by catching four muskies. She had fish measuring 36½, 37, 37 and 40 inches, for a total of 150.5 points. She won a first-place trophy for her effort and was proclaimed the national champion by tournament master of ceremonies Steve Heiting of St. Germain, editor of Musky Hunter Magazine.

Fishing for the first time in the tournament, Peplinski said she caught her fish on a Depth Raider with a black back and white bottom.

"I was fishing with my boyfriend and all he caught was one bass," proclaimed a beaming Peplinski.

The largest fish of the tournament was boated by Dave Stewart of Rhinelander. He caught a 49-inch muskie on Long Lake using a Phantom at 7:55 a.m. Friday.

"I thought it was over 40 inches and it was my biggest muskie by nine inches," said Stewart. "I was casting on an outside weed edge in about 6 feet of water."

Boat winners

Lang, who has been fish-

ing in the tournament with family and friends for the past three years, won the grand door prize — a Ranger boat, 115-horsepower Mercury motor and Minn Kota electric motor.

"When I heard my name announced, I started screaming, but nobody on stage heard me. They almost called another name," said Lang, noting the winner must be present to win.

"When I was younger, I fished in the tournament all the time and then took several years off," said Lang, 34, a design engineer. "I never caught a fish this year, but I won the boat."

While only anglers who entered the tournament for \$55 had a chance at the top door prize, a second identical fishing boat package was given away by the Musky Clubs Alliance following a summer-long fund-raising raffle. That winner was a Shell Lake man, who was not entered in the tourney and was not at the awards program Sunday.

Besides a boat as a top door prize, anglers had a chance to win more than 200 other door prizes Saturday

evening and Sunday afternoon — ranging from muskie baits to rods and reels to huge landing nets. All anglers received a free hat and T-shirt. More than \$40,000 in prizes were awarded during the tournament.

More winners

The 219 muskies registered in the tournament were caught Friday, Saturday and Sunday on seven lake groups comprised of 72 bodies of water. The fish were registered by other tournament anglers right on the water to improve the muskies' chance of survival.

Trophies, courtesy of Miller Beer of the Northwoods, went to the top fishermen and -women.

Placing second in overall points behind Peplinski was Steve Klesmith of Wisconsin Rapids. He caught four fish measuring 35½, 36, 38 and 39½ inches, good for 148.5 points. He was fishing on Ballard Lake casting bucktails and Bull Dawgs.

Third place with three fish went to Shawn Kopke of Appleton. He caught fish

measuring 39, 40½ and 42 inches on Big Sand Lake near Phelps.

Fourth place went to Airin Jensen of Stevens Point, who also registered three fish measuring 36½, 40½ and 41 inches. He was fishing on the Eagle River Chain of Lakes, casting black and silver rubber baits. Fifth place went to Joshua Larson of Cottage Grove, boating three fish measuring 35, 36 and 46½ inches. He was fishing on deepweed edges on Little Arbor Vitae Lake.

Steven Tilque of Pound placed sixth with three fish measuring 34½, 40½ and 41½ inches. He caught his fish on the Sugar Camp Chain of Lakes.

Trophies also went to the anglers catching the largest fish on each lake family as follows: family one, Mark Lynch, Hatley, 49 inches, Kentuck; family two, Dave Stewart, Rhinelander, 49 inches, Long Lake; family three, Travis Kopke, Oconto Falls, 45½ inches, Big Sand; family four, James Pestka, Athens, 45½ inches, Big St.

To OPEN, Pg. 12A



BOAT WINNER — Aaron Lang, front, was all smiles after winning the Ranger boat at the Musky Open in Eagle River Sunday. Celebrating with Lang were, back row from left, chamber Executive

Director Connie Heeg, Musky Clubs Alliance President Larry Slagowski, Jon Koch of Shoeder's RV and Marine in Rhinelander, and Steve Lindahl of Ranger Boats. —STAFF PHOTO

Open: Stewart of Rhinelander catches largest muskie

FROM PAGE 10A

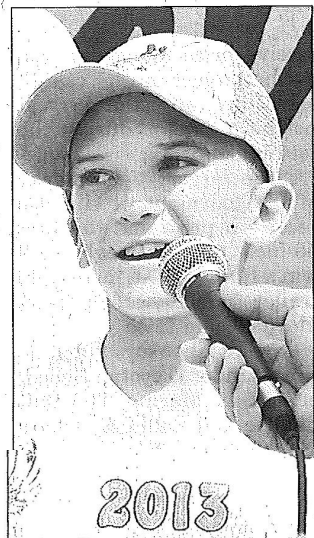
Germain Lake; family five, Joshua Larson, Cottage Grove, 46 1/4 inches, Little Arbor Vitae; family six, Craig Klessig, Valders, 41 1/4 inches, Pickerel Lake; and family seven, Jim Skibbie, Maple Grove, Minn., 45 1/4 inches, Palmer Lake.

Stewart also will receive a reproduction of his fish, the largest of the weekend, at next year's tournament. Completing the reproduction will be taxidermist Joe Fittante of Antigo. Patrick Nelson of Gillett was presented a reproduction Sunday afternoon of last year's largest fish registered in the tournament. It was a 49 1/4-inch muskie caught on Kentuck Lake.

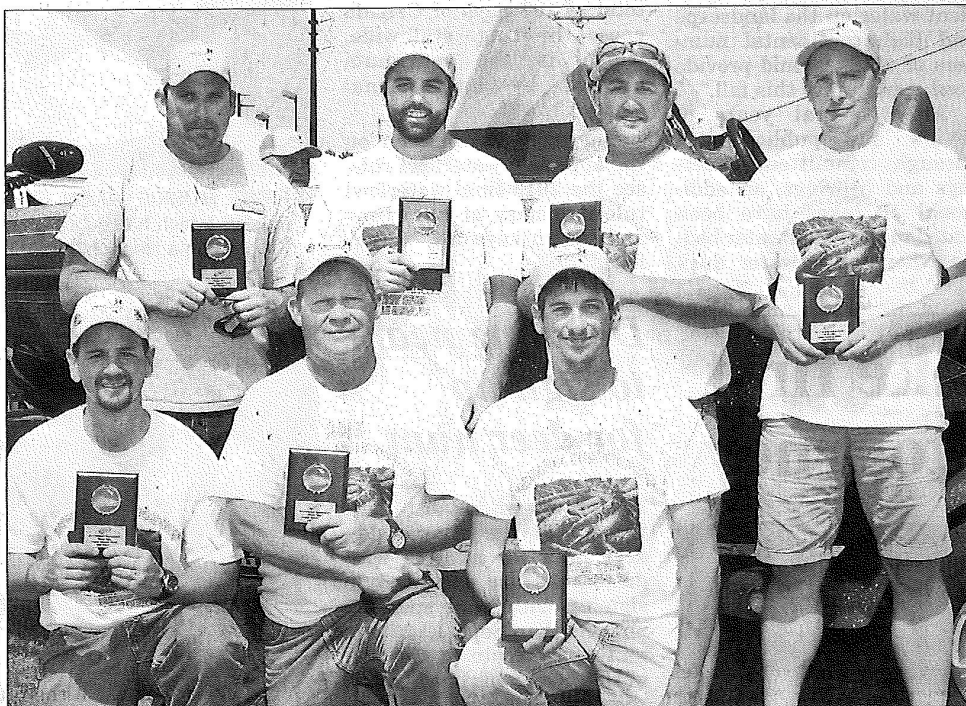
The husband-and-wife team trophy went to Steve and Becky Klesmith of Wisconsin Rapids with their four fish measuring 38, 39 1/4, 35 1/4 and 36 inches. There were 72 teams in the husband-and-wife category. Steve Klesmith caught all four fish on Ballard Lake.

Mathew Nelson of Appleton took home the youth trophy with muskies measuring 42 1/2 and 40 inches. They were his first legal muskies, both caught on Kentuck Lake. There were 69 youths age 15 and younger entered in the tournament.

The guardian/youth trophy went to Mathew Nelson and his father, Bill Nelson, for registering Mathew's two muskies. There were 69 guardian/youth teams.



Youth winner Mathew Nelson told the audience how he caught two muskies.



Anglers catching the largest muskie in each lake family included: front row from left, lake family one, Mark Lynch; two, Dave Stewart; three,

Travis Kopke; back row, four, James Pestka, five, Joshua Larson; six, Craig Klessig; and seven, Jim Skibbie.

Special awards

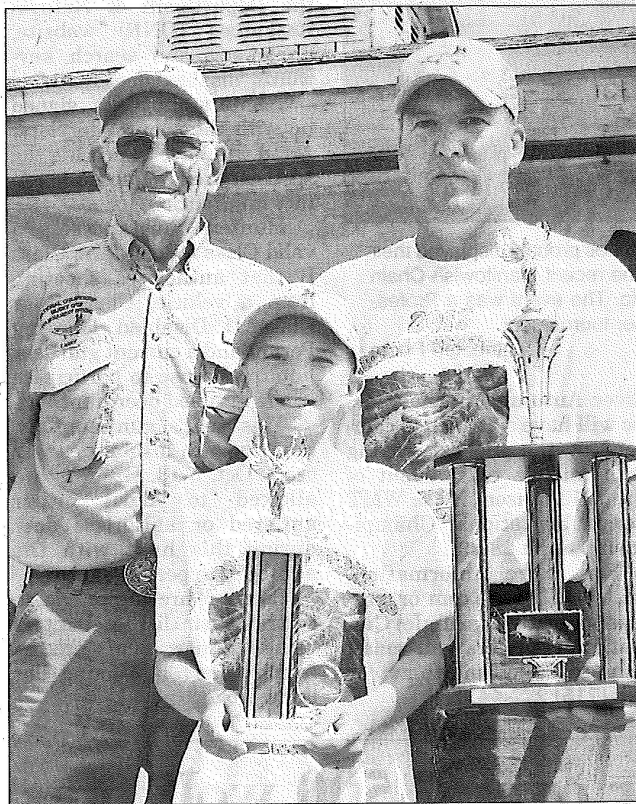
Several awards were presented Sunday afternoon. The Bob James Memorial Award went to Jim Heffner of Eagle River for his long-time involvement in the Janesville Blackhawk Muskie Club and the Headwaters Chapter of Muskies Inc.

The late Bob James was a Midwest sales representative for Ranger Boats who helped start the tournament 28 years ago.

The Mike James Memorial Award, a scholarship to a student in the fisheries program at UW-Stevens Point, also was presented. The late Mike James was the son of Bob James and also was instrumental in supporting the tournament.

All the anglers also were congratulated for the Help Fight Hunger program in support of the Vilas Food Pantry. Each angler was asked to take a nonperishable food item and, in return, each angler would receive one chance at winning a Shimano rod and reel for their donation.

"Thanks to this program, the participants donated more than 3,000 pounds of nonperishable food items to the Vilas Food Pantry, the most ever in the seven years this program has been run-



Larry Slagoski, left, presented the guardian and youth trophies to Bill Nelson and his son, Mathew Nelson.

ning," said Kim Emerson, chamber events coordinator. The pantry also received more than \$2,500 in cash donations.

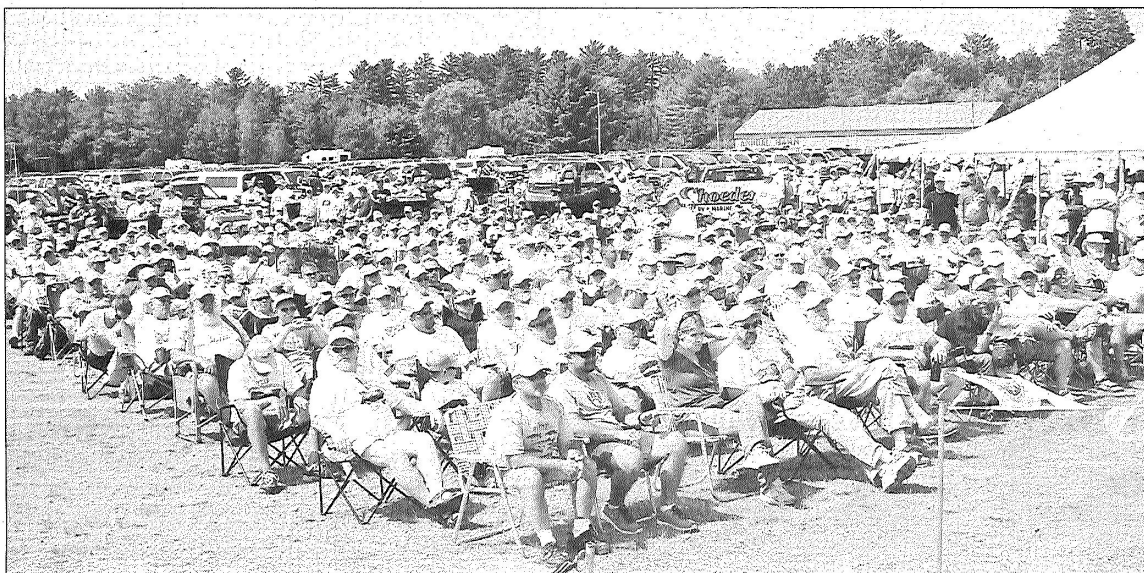
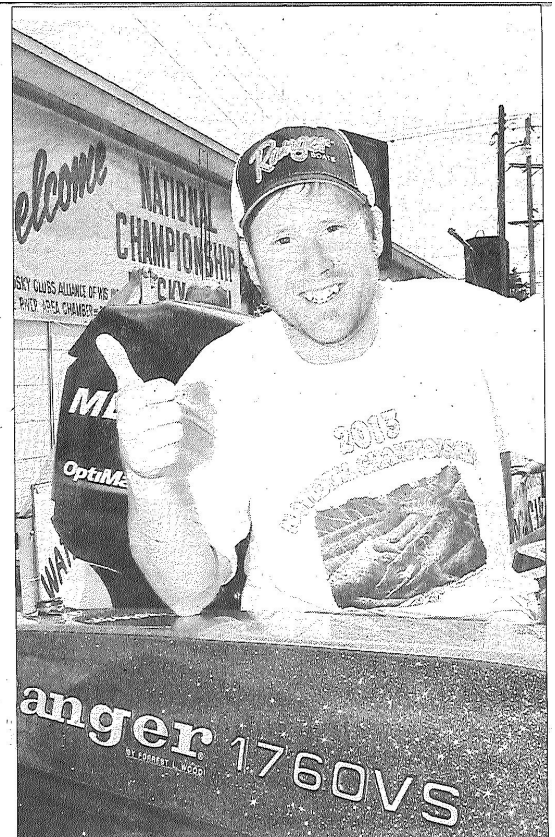
Before sending more than

1,200 fishermen and -women on their way home Sunday, Heiting reminded the muskie hunters that next year's tournament was set for Aug. 15-17, 2014.



RECORD-SETTER — The National Championship Musky Open attracted a record 1,222 participants, bottom, who gathered at the Vilas County Fairgrounds for awards Sunday afternoon. Presenting the awards were, above from left, emcee Steve Heiting, Ranger Boats representative Steve Lindahl and Musky Alliance President Larry Slogalski. Boat winner Aaron Lang, right, of Marshfield gave a big thumbs up, while tournament winner Michelle Peplinski, below, had a big smile during her interview.

—Staff Photos By GARY RIDDERBUSCH





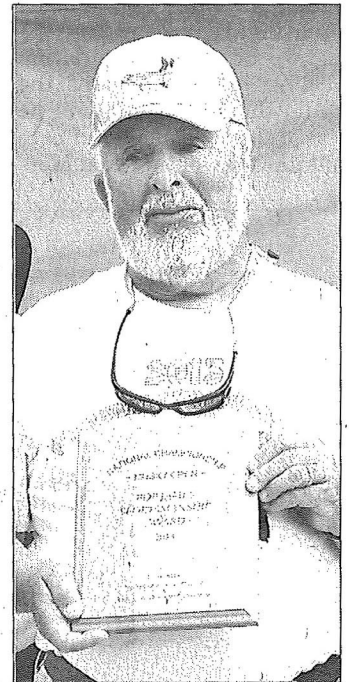
Patrick Nelson, left, of Gillett, was presented a replica of his muskie caught in last year's event. The mount was done by taxidermist Joe Fittante of Antigo. Nelson caught the 49¼-inch muskie on Kentuck Lake.

—Staff Photo By GARY RIDDERBUSCH



Larry Slagoski presented the husband-and-wife team trophy to Becky and Steve Klesmith of

Wisconsin Rapids. They caught four fish to win the division.



Jim Heffner of Eagle River was presented the Bob James Award.